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This publication contains 17 poems that portray experiences of the Native American poet. American Indian images and symbols are combined in these poems: (1) "Grace"; (2) "Bowl With Splatter-Painted Hand"; (3) "Turtle"; (4) "Poem for a Newborn Niece"; (5) "Willowemoc"; (6) "The Vision-Hunter Dies in the Rain"; (7) "At the Top of the Fire Tower in Winter"; (8) "In the Suburbs of Summer"; (9) "Stepchild"; (10) "Dakota"; (11) "The Vision-Hunter Meets a Fellow Vision-Hunter"; (12) "Chenango"; (13) "New Year"; (14) "Snow Fight"; (15) "The Buffalo at Ross Park Zoo"; (16) "Nursing Home Room"; and (17) "Snow Country". (ALL)

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THE BROKEN HOOP

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THE BROKEN HOOP

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". . . . and so long as the hoop was unbroken,
the people flourished."

Black Elk

For Art

GRACE

As my father drives our green Chevy
Into the dark town, my mother lifts me
Above the dashboard to the front window,
Where, past my tiny ghost face
Reflected in the rushing glass, I see
My first city, upstate
Binghamton, New York, high, grey
Rectangles and squares of lighted stores
With bald mannequins staring (nightmare) back at me.
The city is a sea, saloons, restaurants,
Hot swing music drifting on the summer air,
And beautiful women
Silhouetted against the jump and flash
Of blue neon, laughing
At men passing along the long street
My father steers the Chevy through, that
Parts this sea. My brothers play Indian
In the back seat, I smell "Evening of Paris"
On my mother's skin, she sings to me,
And I don't know the name for anyone, yet.
We stop, and my mother gives me over
To my father's arms. He carries me
Up a narrow stairwell, as the cracked
Ceiling curves closer, the naked bulb
At the top of the stairs, the peeling door
Opened by an old woman, my great aunt Grace.
"Grace," the adults say to me, "say Grace,"
As my small tongue moves against my toothless mouth,
And my father places me, now, in my aunt's lap,
She, toothless as myself, bird-brown crone
Bending over me, her hair cascading like moonbeams
Silvering my skin blossomed into a secret flower,
And I say it, "Grace," as she rocks me into sleep.

BOWL WITH SPLATTER-PAINTED HAND

In the universe of the bowl
The girl's hand presses down
Through five centuries, small, delicate,
Hinting at birds in its fingers' upward sweep,
Still radiating
The Sikyatki sun. Yellow-brown on burnt sienna.
Star light on dark sand.

We wonder who she was,
So bent to clay and fire
That even through museum glass
Her hand makes our loins
Burn with strange petroglyphs,
Our bellies dream
Horned serpents and lizard paws,

Until we are held in the hand's halo,
Husband and wife by a dead girl,
Forming, painting, firing us
Into something able to store seeds
For a long time.

TURTLE (for the poet Elizabeth Floyd)

I guess you are the golden girl
The men used to write about,
Turned bohemian, strange,
And a little thin, now.

Tonight, you press a hard circle
Into my open hand, then flee.

Chipped, blue, and yet unnamed
Stone, tiny turtle
Held to my heart line —
Hah-nu-nah.

Elizabeth, from my shell I have watched you,
A black slant of coat in the rain,
A white face in the hallway.

From your shell you have watched me.

Hah-nu-nah. In our poems
We, too, are Earth Bearers
Pushing unborn ghosts up past
Sea waves, burning, burgeoning, breaking

Into bird, beast
And wildest flower.

POEM FOR A NEWBORN NIECE (". . . and we have
therefore resolved to leave our bones in this small space,
to which we are now consigned.")

Star shadow shed on stone,
I rock you, two weeks' face
In full-moon arm —
Old surround
By hemlock fire, while

Those strangers who wish
Blood-tie from you, whisper
Your beauty, hold
The blue, feral light
Of eye on their tongues.

Still, it is each eye's
Ummistakable slope
That turns chair creak
To chant, sets stone
To dreaming
Saskatchewan at fire's edge,

Where sung your Blackfoot mothers,
Hearts lost
In the high, cool stammer
Of wind and north land.

Your navel bleeds, the world's omphalos
Spirals out from a lone drop of Indian blood,
Up there in the bent grasses —
In that place made for knees,
These hopeful fossils
Which are Crazy Horse,

Sunk far in your deep look,
The strong fragility
Of flower.

WILLOWEMOC

Delirious along the bank
White mountain laurel spills
To the Indian river;
Each light breeze shakes petals
Down to still pools of umber
Hugging the shore and the rocks.

I dangle a brown hand
Among the ancient trout
That suspend, invisible, here.
Wet silk brushes homespun skin;
Eyes close into
June's dense smell of moss.
Further out, on the rapids,
Butterflies mount sunrays
And diamonds.

How long has it been
Since the Willowemoc wrestled
My Seneca forbear
To her amber bed?
At home, my mother
Drowns in rooms.

Come night, and laurel leaves
Are poison emeralds
For hungry doe —
Nor, do I know
If my fingers clutch water
Or nettles.

THE VISION-HUNTER DIES IN THE RAIN

Embedded in night, walls shudder
From the whistle and clack
Of a distant train. The rain
Drips from eaves; a faint light
Lines the attic window. This is how
The dead must see. I am dead.

Mother, your hands smelled
Like oak leaves — soothed my hair,
Burning strand after strand,
In the sun. That morning
You learned I was you, carrier
Of nightmare. Japanese beetles clung
To my skull; I woke
All fear and wild roses.

Seneca hands. Six days a week
Grown hard and precise
In the garment factory.
For me, you said. Still, I smelled
Oak, peeled myself
Naked. Soot streets, a gauntlet
Of stares. But clothes
Are not needed.

Until the body becomes a wound
And a loneliness.
Only then do we shroud
What will not be touched. This is how
The dead see; this much
Is vision tamed. My hands, too,
Grow hard. Yet, an old scent
Lingers — crushed leaves, decayed
Beetles. No daughter in me,
No flame.

AT THE TOP OF THE FIRE TOWER IN WINTER

After the arduous ascent,
knees fumbling and pushing
against snow, I have reached
the fire tower. My feet
carry me, trembling,
up its final, steel step.

Paralyzed at the top,
I clutch silver railings
with whitened hands.
I dare gaze only at sky —
yet, startled by wind
from the north, my glance
flits across mountains.

They hunch in a long grey shiver
of trees, like animals hibernating
in the teeth of nightmares.
Beneath frail sun and tower
weeds bend in the clearing
eclipsing the snow.

Once my grandmother walked here,
who now lies like a bundle of
thistles, stark silhouette
on her snow-white bed.
Dying, she did not know me.
I held her thin, brown wrist
and the lingering legends,

while her eyes acquired
the strange, shy look of
deer. She entered a
wilderness of shadow,
and I swallowed myself
into the forest of my body.

Wolf without tears,
I am left stalking bones
where there are no fires.
My hands ache from their clinging;
my half-breed heart chants
for the fall.

IN THE SUBURBS OF SUMMER

I.

Breaching the paralyzed day
We read books
On Indians. Our summer
Is for this: quiet sitting
In the queer sun, until

That brief moment when
We dream at the edges
Of each other's eyes,

Our hot legs suddenly clutching
The flecked and heaving sides
Of stolen horses. This way

We don't have to
Talk to each other, or ask
What brought us in
From the prairie of fire.

II.

Evening turns my ears
To glistening shell
And moon spiral;

I bring sea sound to that tight skin
Which echoes both the drum
And the night chant
Of your hidden heart.

I bring wolf light,
Despite the shaded glow
Of metal lamps. Something
Is singing here —
Something, also, wise enough
For silence.

III.

Across the lengthening lawns of night,
A young dog's ceaseless yelping —

Where a white wolf flees,
You enter me

Out of an ignored
And mortgaged grief.

STEPCHILD

In another world, child, your hot head bows
Beneath a round sun,
And wild as desert ponies
Your hair breaks in irridescent strands
Against the high cliffs of cheekbone.
At home in bird sound
And the soundless turning
Of the Mother Earth,
You watch, motionless, an orange salamander
Swirl its soft length of red spots
Across your open prayer hands.

To us, to the tribes, the child
Who cannot sit still
Is a half-developed child,
Caught in a windflaw
And shaken down into
Loud wheels, cogs, and grinding halts.
So I watch you, as you knew how to watch
In the other world,

But cannot catch you
In my own prayer hands
As night falls,
You skulking off to your metallic gods
And lightless square of upstairs room,
I stumbling in old moonlight.

DAKOTA

I stumble down side streets.
What the white man said
Was my mind
Becomes black wire, crossed
And re-crossed —
My seeing set
Against sharded sky,
And neon, red
As the sudden memory
Of Wounded Knee,
Its daughters slain.

Murdered, not far
From this Dakota town.
Now, an antelope
Lies in a ditch,
Neck broken
By some careless car.
Why did it wander in
Out of the buffalo grass,
Step in
From the shimmering breeze, and moon,
And haunted prairie?

My answer is
To lie in the ditch, also.
Nowhere else to go,
Nothing left to do
But drink cheap wine
And vomit up the white man's
Hollow talk, while my small hand curls
Near the dead heart of a dead animal.

THE VISION-HUNTER MEETS A FELLOW VISION-HUNTER

Tonight,
I think of Cherokees.
I watch their eyes
At ease with the dreams
Of campfires. So they permit
Their beloved woman. She

And her burnished hand. It holds
The bright swan feather
That keeps her tribe from war.

I sit facing you, now,
And recognize we make
Our own tribe.
For strangers, we have talked
A long while. Seeing you
Hunched towards me,
I wish I
Could touch you. Instead,
I notice each our hands clutched,
Concealing prayers.

I think again
    Of that woman.

I regret that the light here
Is too fierce, and annihilates
Shadow. We tell our battles,
And your words take me
Out past walls, to the moonlit
Hills. Wingless, my fingers
Flinch. Yet
Soon will the milkweed open, and,
In a white silence
Our hearts may spill.

CHENANGO

The night has her altars
For grief. Murmuring
Chenango, you are
One of these. I crouch
And mourn by you, river,
Dreaming shadowed chants
Of Indians, dreaming
My tongue set free.

Indigo water, pulling
Streetlights, gold,
To the sea —
Away from cars that spill
Bright faces and
The careful conspiracies
Of Saturday night, of
All our nights, into bars
And the rituals of time.

Chrysallis of coat and scarf,
Heart cradled like garnets,
I crystallize
In a stillbirth of fire.
Take me, too, Chenango.
Croon, and carry
These eyes blurred
By weeping and snow.

We silent ones,
We do not praise
The sea. She mothers
Our tears, and visions
Fractured
By a death I can't tell.

NEW YEAR

Flame confined in red glass;
Shadows flung and flickering
Against rattled walls. It is always
The same: a woman's hand
Lights a candle, hovers
Like a burnt moth, dark
With waiting.

I grow tired
Of these church services
For bloodless men. A great wail
Sets in, that carries me,
Past walls,
Into snow and ice —
And the strange, grey blaze
Of wind at New Year.

I follow
My own
Trail of tears, kneel
At the steep-banked
Susquehanna, knee-deep
In river-rocks
And old milkweed.
My face flees skyward,
Where a lone seagull
Lifts the moon like an opal
On its outstretched wing, circling
In some self-taught dream.

SNOW FIGHT

A soft fire, and smell of snow to come.
Breasts shiver beneath a thin coat;
Hands wince frail and hollow
As sparrow bones. Your tongue angry,
Whose words break flesh
Lonely for sacraments.
I sparrow, but you buzzard
Making dead lives bleed. Only
Let me not show it
In my Lazarus eyes.

The seasons change, and
My Indian body heals
In the sun's round solace.
Thighs move dark among clustering ferns;
They dream in a deer's long motion.
Here may men wholly destroy
But never touch. And here
Thought turns light
Into lamentation. So humbled by wilderness
I admit to the suffering
Sparrow in you, in me
A spiraling shadow.

THE BUFFALO AT ROSS PARK ZOO

The first time I saw you at Ross Park Zoo
you stood among the dingy snows of April —
magnificent beast!
Did you see my hands that grasped
and shook the fence that kept you captive?
And still you remain.
Yet how many nights since
have I returned to Binghamton rooms,
dreaming you out of contentment at Ross Park Zoo?
Totem beast, shaggy brother,
over and over I have guided you,
a dervish galaxy across midwest plains.
Headed for the Dakotas,
heels dug into heaving sides,
I have beat and kicked you to fury.
Together we've stampeded
the tract-house suburbs of sleeping America.

Because I, too, know about contentment.
Paralyzed by the lure of endless rooms,
held fast by the bribes of food and touch,
mystery has often been the cause of nervous laughter.
It only needed you;
it only wanted the crazed rolling of your stricken eyes,
for me to free us both, sad beast.
I have urged you deep, deep,
into Indian Territory;
we have stopped and gazed far
among the soft, wild grasses.

NURSING HOME ROOM

In the mountains my mother and I
Visit my great-aunt. She sits, solitary
(like all our "blood"), facing a blank wall.
"It's us, Aunt Ida. Do you know us? Us!"
We place our hopeful gifts, rose stick-pin, purple
Gloxinia, on a bare table, recite the past
In mixed women's voices, old stories,
New silences. She cries.
("All I need is someone to talk to").
The hands that made our quilt, so often left
In a green heap, bunch like two fetuses
Fated for stillbirth. I stroke her hair,
My own hands gathering in
Soft silver. Ida, who were your lovers?

SNOW COUNTRY

Behind slatted glass
The last log in the wood stove
Breaks apart, red-orange, in an uprush of sparking flame.
Its new ends clunk hard against piled ash.
My mother cries out from bed,
Breast cancer crawling up her strung bones
Into her broken neck. I want to scream, myself.
Instead, I carry the grey kitten
I've been sheltering on my nervous lap
To bedside, place my mother's fingers
On its warm fur. If only this, the skin
And delicate breathing of a small cat
Could bribe her back into life!
I watch the pale hands rise up and down
With the kitten's breath.
Outside, snow falls in bright daylight.
In here, my mother opens her mouth, no sound.
I move my hand next to hers,
And together we wait, our hands rising up,
Listening as my mother's bones fall away
Like spring snow.

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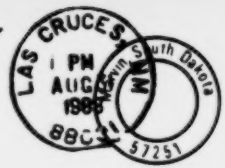

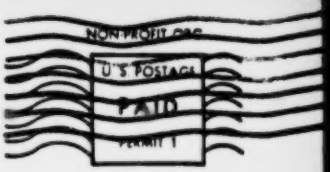

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